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Crew of the EPPLETON HALL

Conversation with Captain John Watson,
K. K. , National Maritime Museum, June
1979

At the back, right, is Neddy Fields. He was part of the EPPLETON HALL; he was there for donkey's years . . and donkey's years. He was one of the fittings; he idolized the EPPLETON HALL. He's dead now, poor soul.

Ned was what you would call a real, good, dependable tug engineer. And a gentleman. He had a great sense of humor. Later, when I left the EPPY HALL to skipper a screw tug, Neddy Fields and I continued to be the best of friends until he died.

George Robson, the fireman, was Neddy's co-partner on the engine stand. (left, front). One of the most conscientious tug men I ever worked with in my life -- and I was in the tugs 48 years. We all lived in the east end of Sunderland, close to the docks. You could collect a crew and be there in half an hour -- the whole lot.

George was a great soccer player in his younger years -- for that matter he had a trial for the Sunderland Football Club. They were in the first division of English football in those years.

The mate, "Tot" (Thomas) Robson (left, rear) was his nephew. He was there for quite a while and then went into a self-propelled barge carrying shale from the collieries to the dumping grounds off Sunderland. I met him recently; he's working ashore in some factory.

The mate's job was to maintain the tug. He was a good hand. . he was dead clever. I used to help him as skipper, though; I used to grain the wheel screen, put a few "seagulls" flying around in the graining with me thumb. I've still got my combs and rubbers.

Tot was also one of the best heaving line throwers of the "Three Rivers" -- the Tyne, the Wear, and the Tees.

The boy, Ken Stanners, the apprentice, was there about four years. Then he went to sea and never came back any more. I think he went in the caterer's side of it, in the galley, deep sea. You lose track of them when they go to sea like that.

The apprentice looks after the galley, keeps the cabins clean. He got in the bunkers and trimmed the coal when the bunkers were running low. We took aboard twenty-five tons of coal every fortnight. He used to get into the bunker and shovel it down towards the door in the fire hole.

John Watson (right), myself, skipper -- I was in the EPPLETON HALL some four or five years in the early 1950s. (Tug masters on Tyne & Wear were always referred to as "Skipper"). The ROKER was my first command; I was about fifteen years in her, then five years in the EPPLETON HALL, then the screw-tug SOUTER, named for Souter Point between the Wear and the Tyne. I had served my apprenticeship in the SOUTER at age fifteen, beginning in 1929. I had been in the paddle steamer IRON before that as a boy, but my proper apprenticeship was in the SOUTER. After the EPPLETON HALL I was ten years in the CORNHILL, an American built diesel tug (the EPPLETON HALL has one of her lifeboats now) then I finished up as skipper of France Fenwick's new tug DUNELM. I went down to take her from the builder at Hessle, a mile above Hull on the Humber, when she was spanking new.

I got four pound ten a week as skipper of the ROKER. And we had to supply our own grub. We must have been crazy, but we loved tugs. That's all; that's why we stayed.

We got an additional 2/6 for taking a ship to sea, and 5 shillings for a ship inward. This was in addition to the day's work which began at half past seven and ran till five. But a ship that was due at five might not really arrive until eight in the morning, so you would hang on all night for five shillings. We always felt that the office knew where that ship was -- behind Flamborough Head sheltering, or in Hawk Roads at the mouth of the Humber -- but they didn't tell us. In any case we always felt there was the chance of another ship coming in that they didn't know about, and sometimes that happened. So we "hung on" as we called it. All night at times.

Those fellows in the photograph -- had some rough times together, some hard work together. Some falls out -- you could get tired of looking at them; you even have fall outs in big ships. But they were all tugboatmen from tugboat families, related to each other. The jobs were 'anded down, just the same as the pilots jobs in Sunderland and the foy boatmen (what you call line handlers here.) All families.

We used to say that a tug man had one good sole and one with a hole in it.

I still have a callous on me left foot from kicking the trippet in the ROKER. The sole of my shoe wore out, what with kicking that trippet.

When you went in a pub and sat down, you could tell a tugboat man by looking at his shoe: "He must work the engine of a paddle tug."

We all used to give each other a hand. As skipper, I would go down and paint and grain. Or over the side to paint. I would help put the coal in when we bunkered. Some of the skippers wouldn't do it, but I did. It gave the others encouragement to help me when I needed it.

The mate would clean one engine down, the fireman the other. Emery paper the crossheads and the handles where the door had been open and the weather got to them -- keep the steel work up to scratch. The engines were kept clean and smart. The framing guides for the crossheads were painted green with a thin yellow stripe down the outside of them.

On a really warm day the mate would leave off just watching the towline and go on the engine stand and relieve one of those two. The engineer might say, "Come on, I'll spell you," to the skipper. The engineer could tow as well as I could. In the Lambton tugs you had to go right through -- apprentice, fireman, mate, engineer, and then skipper. That way nobody aboard could get back at you. The skipper could say to the engineer if he was complaining, "I've packed a few glands in my time."

The EPPLETON HALL, when she was built for the Lambton colliery, had a beautiful wheelhouse. She was the only one I knew that had a wheelhouse on. But at some point long before I had her, they took the top of the wheelhouse off. I think myself it must have been a nervous skipper that had it done. All you had for communication was "bush telegraph" -- giving a shout. No mechanical engine room telegraph.

"Timber in the port wheel!"

Or, "Timber coming toward the starboard wheel!"

Or orders shouted when docking a ship.

It could be a serious matter if you didn't hear these things. The funnel was right behind you; there could be a terrible racket when the safety valve used to blow off up the waste pipe up the front of the funnel. Say you are alongside a ship and expecting a big pull. Your steam is at maximum; you need it when handling a ship. But sometimes the vessel slips into her berth easily . . you don't need all that steam, the safety valve blows off. The pilot gives a toot on a pea whistle --

that's all he has to direct the towing -- and you can't hear it for all the noise. How all this goes depends on what the pilot does and what the fellow at the other end of the ship does to help you, the other tug.

The engineer pulls the damper down to slow the fires and he puts the donkey pump on to the boilers to add cold water from the river. But all that takes time. In the meantime you have a racket going on and can't hear.

The ROKER couldn't get a passenger license from the Board of Trade because her engine casing was mostly wood. On the EPPLETON HALL it was steel, so France Fenwick decided to make what alterations on her the Board of Trade required.

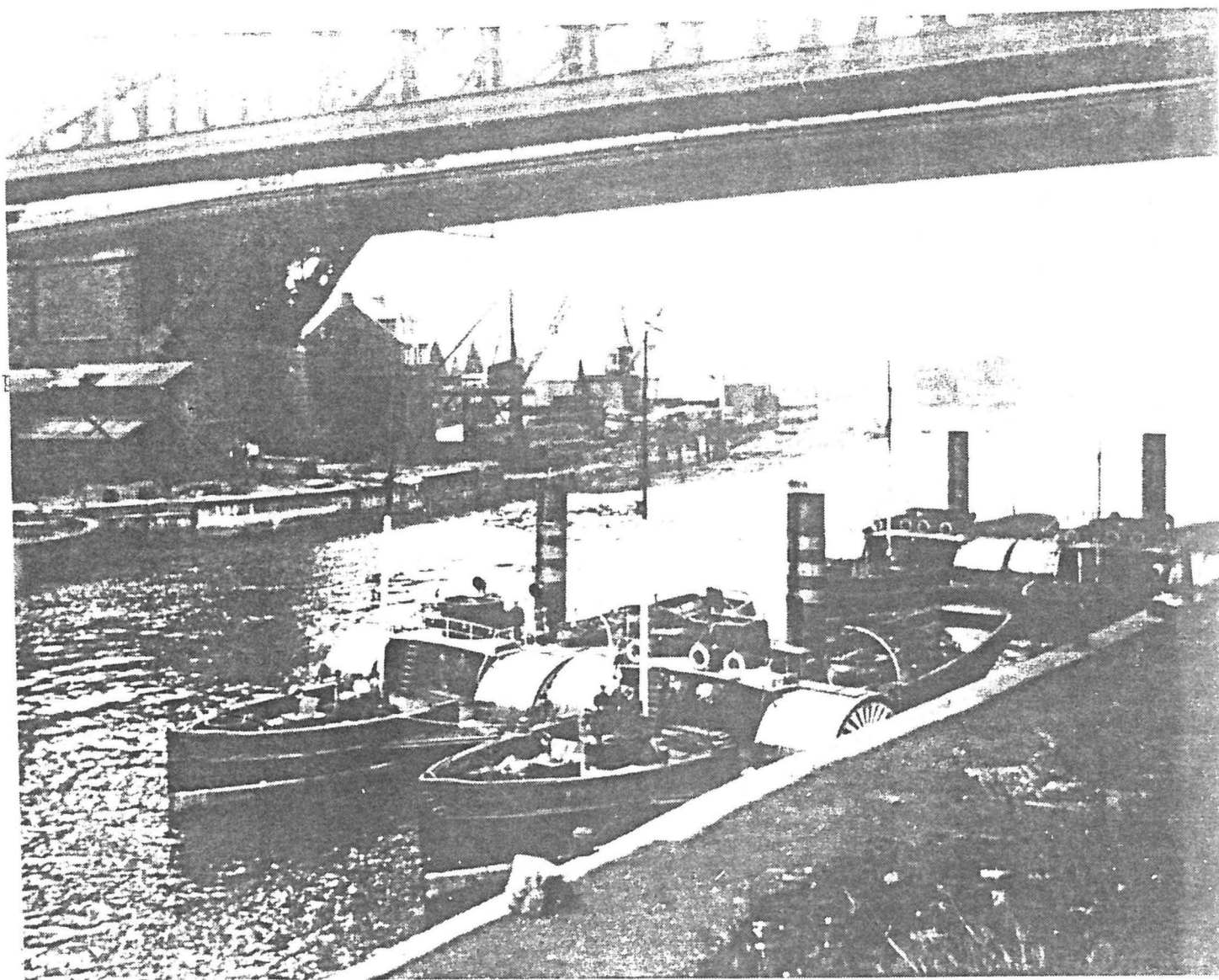
They boxed her in. Old Ned didn't like that. They were altering his tug. On a warm day, he complained that he couldn't get a breath. Before that it was open at the back and he used to stand there working the levers. In an overcoat, if need be, in the wintertime.

Ned always wore a flat cap. You weren't a tow man if you didn't wear a flat cap.

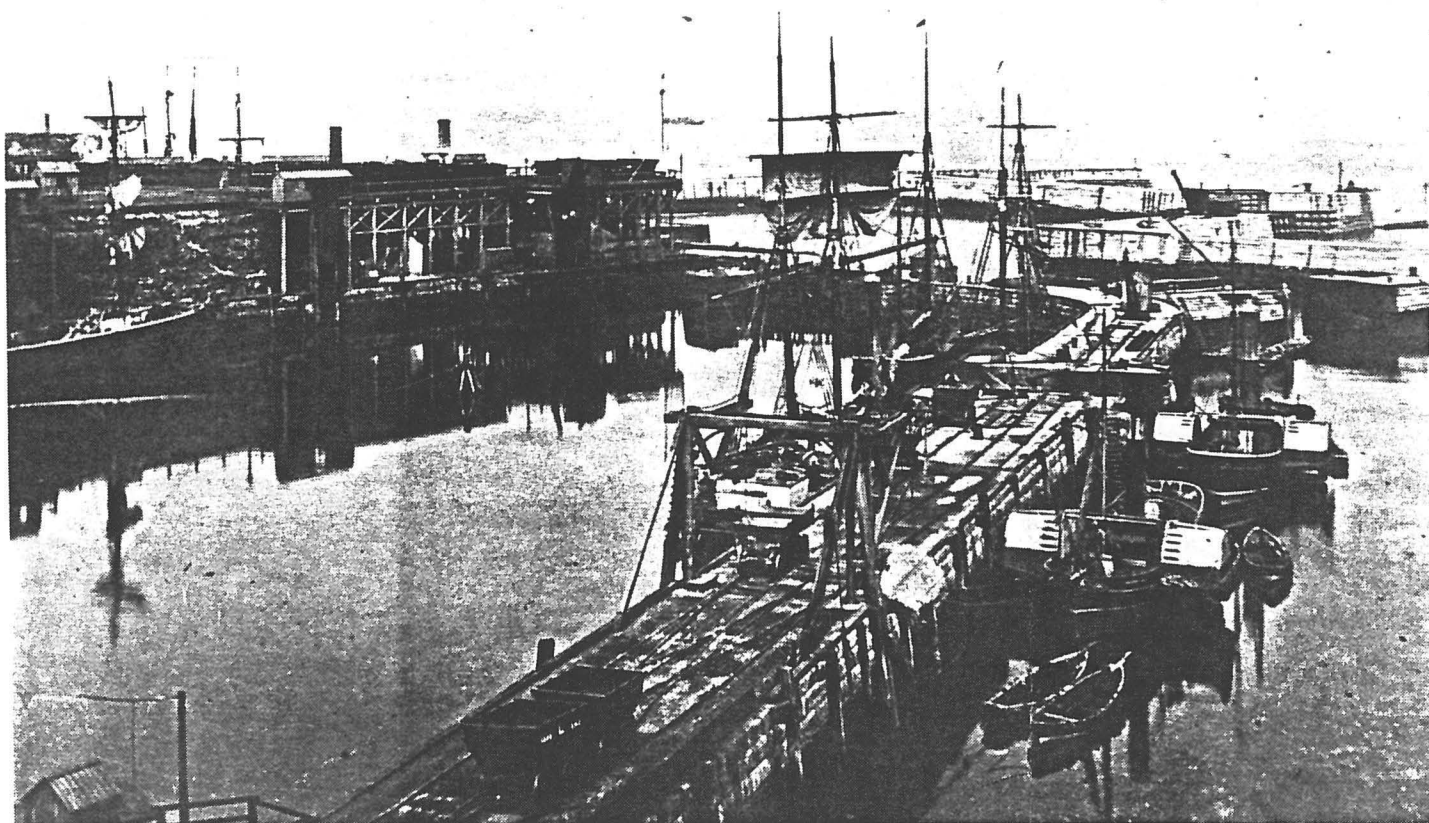
The idea of the passenger certificate was to go off to a new built steamer when she was on her acceptance trials and take off the officials and owners and shipyard representatives so that the new ship could proceed on her way.

Sunderland was the foremost shipbuilding city in the world; during the war a quarter of the ships built in England were launched there. If a steamer was accepted from the builder it did not make sense to put back into Sunderland, losing time and paying port charges and pilot charges, if the officials could be taken off outside.

They took the top of the wheelhouse off long before the Board of Trade alterations, as best as I know. All that was left of that beautiful wheelhouse in my day was a screen, up to your chest. It was some protection, but nothing out of the ordinary. I tell you it used to put roses in your cheeks standing up there when it was snowing and blowing!



Lambton, Hetton & Joicey paddle tugs LUMLEY, EPPLETON HALL (inboard), THOMAS NICHOLSON, and HOUGHTON (inboard) tied up under the Wearmouth Bridge at Vaux's Quay, Sunderland. (Vaux Brewery). The steamers in the background are lying at buoys waiting to load.



Collier brigantines and paddle tugs in Seaham Harbour, an old photograph.

Neg. # 3697 Beamish North of England
Museum, Stanley, County Durham.

Going back to the days before Lambton's and France Fenwick amalgamated (November, 1945):

A little "needle" that used to come in was with us laying close to the harbor mouth and "stealing" their ships. Our mooring berth was the new Corporation Quay. Unless the weather was bad when we had to go further up the river clear of the swell to the Hulk Tier buoys situated just above the ferry landing just round the first bend in the river.

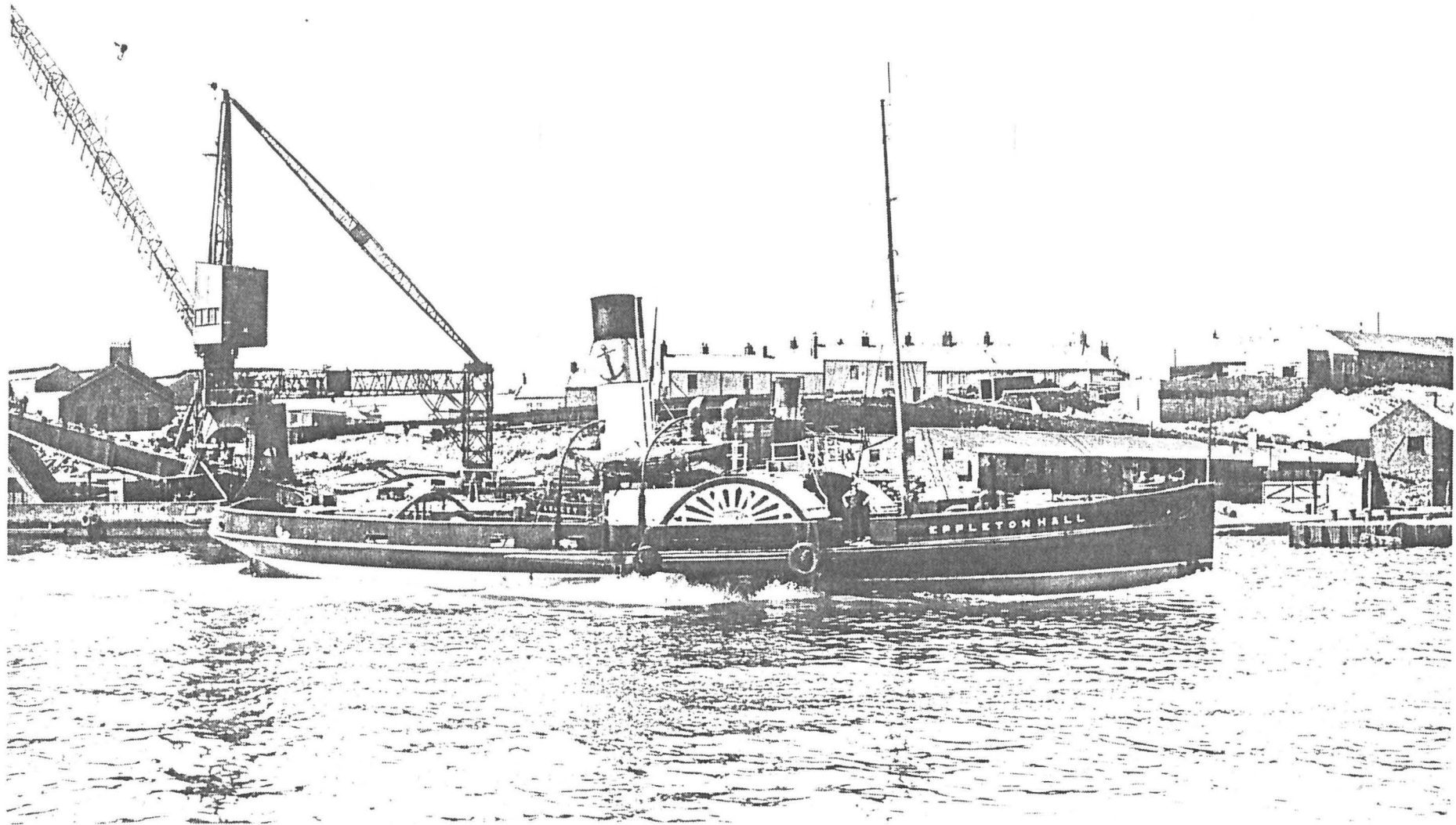
Say a ship comes in from sea for the Lambton colliery up the Wear. The Lambton tugs had to come from their mooring berth in the upper reaches of the river (Austin's Point.) The collier would be on passage from the Thames to Sunderland to load coal. The "word" you got (you would call it the "message") of ships bound north was not so efficient in those days as what it is at present with the V. H. F. radio. A ship may be due at 9:00 o'clock at night for Lambton's and after leaving the Thames on his passage north the wind may have turned fair and he might beat his e. t. a. -- estimated time of arrival -- by two hours.

The ship would enter the port blowing the Lambton signal, one long and two short, one long and two short. But all their own tugs were up the river -- they only had two tugs on duty at a time. Anyway he would keep this up for 3/4 of an hour in the Swinging Basin. Sometimes he'd put his anchor down when he knew the tugs weren't there for him. Finally he'd get disgusted and give the France Fenwick signal -- two long and five short -- the "cockle-do-da-do."

We'd get under way, get connected, swing her (they towed up the river stern first) and start up the Wear. We'd meet the EPPLETON HALL or the THOMAS NICHOLSON or whichever one it was coming down. There were some unprintable things shouted at us -- well, really, both ways.

That meant we would get paid for a second ship -- as I say you got the large amount of five shillings for each ship. (Each man in the crew got it -- the boy only got half). Say it was the SOUTER's nigh on and there is a ship due at five o'clock this evening. And say we had one sailing at nine -- the tide is at nine -- and another one in the early morning -- you were going to have a good night's work. But say there was only one ship due; she might not come. He might be well adrift of his time. That meant we were on all night for one ship. So we would be glad to pick up one of Lambton's.

The skipper used to get called up to the office for taking a Lambton ship. They would say "Don't do it again!" But they didn't really mean it because they would slip him an extra "towage" -- five bob (only the skipper got the five shillings in this case -- on the q. t.) We called this a "catch job." The Lambton people would do the same given half a chance, but we had more opportunity lying near the harbor mouth.



That's George Robson standing on the foredeck, and Alfie "Sandy" Anderson leaning on the after timberhead. George Renwick is inside the screen; he's the skipper. George had his golden wedding just a fortnight ago; he had a good do going for him in The Ivy Leaf, the Working Men's Club of Swinderland.

Entrance to John Crown's Strand slipway at right. They've started to clear out for building the new launching ways for Crown so the big tankers could be launched down the river instead of across. The dredge is no doubt there to take out the old quay and the LUMLEY (in the background) would be taking the dumb barges to sea.

You can see where they've started to clear out the old shipyard works this side of the fence behind the EPPLETON

*Captain John Watson
7/7/81, San Francisco*

Anchor Tugs

(Owners)

FRANCE FENWICK TYNE &

WEAR Co., Ltd.,

Newcastle upon Tyne, 1

Steam Whistle Signals:

Tyne—1 Long and 1 Short Blast

Wear—2 Long, 4 Short and 1 Long
Blast

For Telephone Numbers see back pages

TUGS OPERATING ON TYNE:

Hendon*
Wearmouth*
George V.*
Robt. Redhead*
Cullercoats
Malta

Criccieth
Dunelm
Washington
Conqueror
Gt. Emperor

TUGS OPERATING ON WEAR:

Fulwell
Cleadow
Roker
Seaburn
Stag

President
Wexford
Corsair
Souter

Lumley
Houghton
Eppleton Hall
Snowdon

* Equipped with Wireless and D.F.
For Call Signals see back of book.

RIVER TYNE.

Newcastle Swing Bridge Closed for Shipping
between

6.30 a.m. & 6.50 a.m.	12.0 noon & 12.20 p.m.
7.10 „ 7.30 „	12.40 p.m. 1.0 „
8.0 „ 8.20 „	1.20 „ 1.40 „
8.40 „ 9.0 „	

Height of High Level Bridge, 82 feet H.W.
O.S.T. from Water Line.

RIVER WEAR.

Height of Bridge, 84 feet H.W.
O.T.S. from Water Line.

For Telephone Numbers see back pages

From a 1948 tide book issued by France Fenwick
Paddle tugs on the lists are indicated by a dash.

What we used to say -- the Lambton tugs and the France Fenwick tugs; they were two quite different lots of people, for all they were tug boat men. The France Fenwick tugs did both river and sea work. The Lambton tugs avoided any sea work -- it was always river work from the lower reaches of the river to the Lambton, Hetton, Joicey staithes. In the river itself the Lambton tugs worked "the upper reaches" from Austin's (if they worked over-night they moored there at Austin's pontoon), the Gill Quay, Vaux's Quay -- that's the brewery -- Ducher's buoys (that's another brewery opposite Austin's Point, but the mooring had nothing to do with the brewing.)

If there was a half ebb at spring tides and there'd been a lot of rain in the upper reaches of the Wear and there was a lot of fresh water coming down on the top and you had to start a ship away, you must have a full head of steam before you ever cast off from the buoys at the waiting berth. You might even have to watch out for small trees floating down and getting in the floats.

This was when she was a Lambton tug, before I was ever in her; I was working for France Fenwick. They would give her a good firing -- until flames shot out of the funnel six or seven feet. The diamond plating on the stokehold floors, the boiler casing, and anything else that was loose would be vibrating. The whole tug would be rattling until you could hear it from quayside. She was so hot that they had to use rags in their hands going down the engine room stairs and holding on to the railings.

In fact, when we were at Corporation Quay we could hear the EPPLETON HALL coming down the river before we ever saw her. This was in the Lambton days; they had better bunkers than we did. They had household coal; we had rubbish.

In any case, the EPPLETON HALL usually came down the river stern first, the rudder amidships. The skipper George Renwick, had a becket on the wheel house floor and he would put it on the wheel to keep it from flying hard over. Neddy Fields would then set the tug away full astern -- she would cause a good six foot swell from her backwater. Neddy -- the engineman -- brought her down, no orders, no nothing. He would keep an eye on a mark down the river so she would go straight and would go faster on one paddle wheel and slower on the other as required to keep her on her course.

When they got down into the lower reaches, he would call up to George: "She's all yours now."

Then I took her over and Neddy did it for the first time; I was scared to death. I had never experienced anything going as fast astern and nobody giving any orders. Neddy remarked, "It's alright, John. I'll look after you." And he did.

Neddy -- he was that much of a tugboatman that if you were doing wrong, he would tell you you were doing wrong. He was a lot older than me. And you had to take notice of him.

George Graham, engineman in the ROKER, used to love to have his engine room right perfect. He used to go around every day for a couple of hours or so wiping down and looking after his bright work and his brass work and steel railings and such. The time came when he decided his engine room needed a coat of paint again. The top was painted white -- a white deckhead -- the sides were smoothed off with sandpaper to remove any blisters or irregularities and then the fireman and myself primed these surfaces ready for graining with a light stone color. Graining, varnished over, was considered the ultimate finish -- even if it was just combed with a steel comb over the raw sienna we used to put on. Graining not only looked attractive, but it was practical -- wash it down with soap and water every three months or so and give it another coat of varnish.

Now, I was considered a good hand at graining and I had told George that I would do his engine room. I still have my steel combs, and a couple of rubbers that I used to put the figure in the wood with. I wanted to see the tug look smart just as much as he did.

So all the engine room sides were prepared for "the artistic touch".* But we were busy and for all that there was a small door that opened out on deck forward and the engine room being all open aft, it still got pretty warm when we'd been towing. It was too hot in there, the cylinder covers and all, to be clambering about the engine room doing a graining job. On this particular night we finished work about ten o'clock and we had another job early in the morning. If we were going to turn out early like this we just stayed on board; there was no good in going home and disturbing our families. So I turned in on the settee down in the ROKER's after cabin -- I was skipper -- and about two o'clock in the morning here comes George Graham. He gave me a shake.

"She's nicely cooled off now," he said, "Why not take a chance and get one side done."

* The ROKER had a wooden engine house -- the EPPLETON HALL had a steel one and that was the reason the Board of Trade insisted that France Fenwick pass the ROKER's passenger certificate, which she had had for a long time, to the EPPLETON HALL. But the EPPLETON HALL had to have steel bulwarks fitted aft, have steel skylights made to replace her wooden ones, and have the engine stand enclosed on its after end. The engine house was extended aft a bit, doors were fitted on the sides of this, and the structure



That's George Graham in the light-colored jacket . .

I am standing on his right; this is when we had the ROKER. I don't remember the name of the young fellow at the end, but at far left is another Swinhoe, a pal of mine, Dick. Dick was a tug apprentice who joined the navy at the outbreak of war and was in an incident up at Namsos in Norway in a mine sweeper. This was H. M. T. ARAB, commanded by Lieut. Commander Stannard who was awarded the Victoria Cross. It had to do with putting her nose up against a wooden jetty to evacuate troops and saving numerous lives in the midst of heavy enemy bombing and machine gunning.

After the war when Dick returned he was mate with me in the ROKER and later skipper of the ROBERT RED-

I wasn't very pleased about being awakened at this hour to grain an engine room, but George was one of those pleasant people you can't refuse, even under these circumstances. So I got up and found he had the oil lamps lit and I set to work. George preceded me with the raw sienna mixed in boiled oil to put an over coat on the stone color. Sometimes you would vary the darkness or lightness of the different panels to give it the variation that wood panelling would have. Then I came along with my combs -- wide teeth and fine teeth, both, to give variation and a clean white cloth over your thumb to make an occasional different pattern. I had bought a rubber roller in Sunderland market that had a wood pattern raised on it -- I used that, too. But the ends were pretty severe where you had to leave off with the roller for lack of space and some artistry came in here to lay this pattern into the rest of the decorative plan.

The finishing coat, the varnishing, was the most particular part of the job in many ways. We would wait on that until it was the tug's duty-free night and we would be up at our mooring place, Hulk Tier buoys. The fires would be banked and there would be no ash or coal dust flying around to lodge in the fresh varnish. Graham did that by himself, working in the afternoon when the light was good so he wouldn't get any runs and the varnish had all night to dry.

The boiler front would be done with white zinc powder that had been mixed with paraffin -- that was a finish for a hot surface. The paraffin would burn out, but the zinc would stay white.

The smoke box doors that you looked into to see the tube boxes were painted black. When you thought the tubes were in need of a cleaning, you used to "sweep the tubes", as we called it -- each one individually -- with a long brush. When the soot was cleaned out you got a better draught and she used to steam better.

(footnote continued)

got a back end for the first time. Previously like most of those old paddle tugs, there were big folding doors in back, but these could be burst in if ever -- not that it was likely to happen -- a big sea boarded her.

These changes were so that EPPLETON HALL could go out in the North Sea and remove the party from a new steamer that had just completed its acceptance trials -- I have had as many as eighty people on board. We had some nasty bumps going alongside when a sea was running, for all that the ship gave you a lee.

The EPPLETON HALL's starboard engine and the ROKER's port one was a bit funny . . stiff to work. George Graham, the chief on the ROKER's, explanation was that "she was fine in the slides", meaning the engine was too finely machined by the builder.

If you filled your grease cup (as we called it, although we didn't use grease in them) with castor oil it would ease the working of the engine. The chief used to fill the grease cups and say, "Now, save that until you need it." He meant getting in a tight situation when you would need the engine to perform at its best. You weren't supposed to turn the lever and open the valve and let the oil run down until then. George Graham didn't like to waste anything -- he was very conscious of how much castor oil you used.

But I didn't like that engine -- you used to pull the shoulders out of you working the handles. That's when I was fireman. I used to distract his attention: "Is that someone shouting?" I would kick the handle down and let the oil run through her when he wasn't looking.

You're wasting the stuff!" he would say when he saw what I'd done. But it helped. Although he was right -- it was using the castor oil to excess. It used to run down into the bilge and congeal with the coal muck there and form round balls about the size of a tennis ball or larger. They could foul the bilge pump.

You mustn't let the web go on the bottom when you are maneuvering -- if your crank went right down that meant you had to bounce your handle again and again to get the steam underneath the piston to lift it--one way or the other. It could start up in the opposite way to what you wanted the engine to go. But if you kept her at half-stroke (you watched the crossheads) your web would be in position to go either ahead or astern.

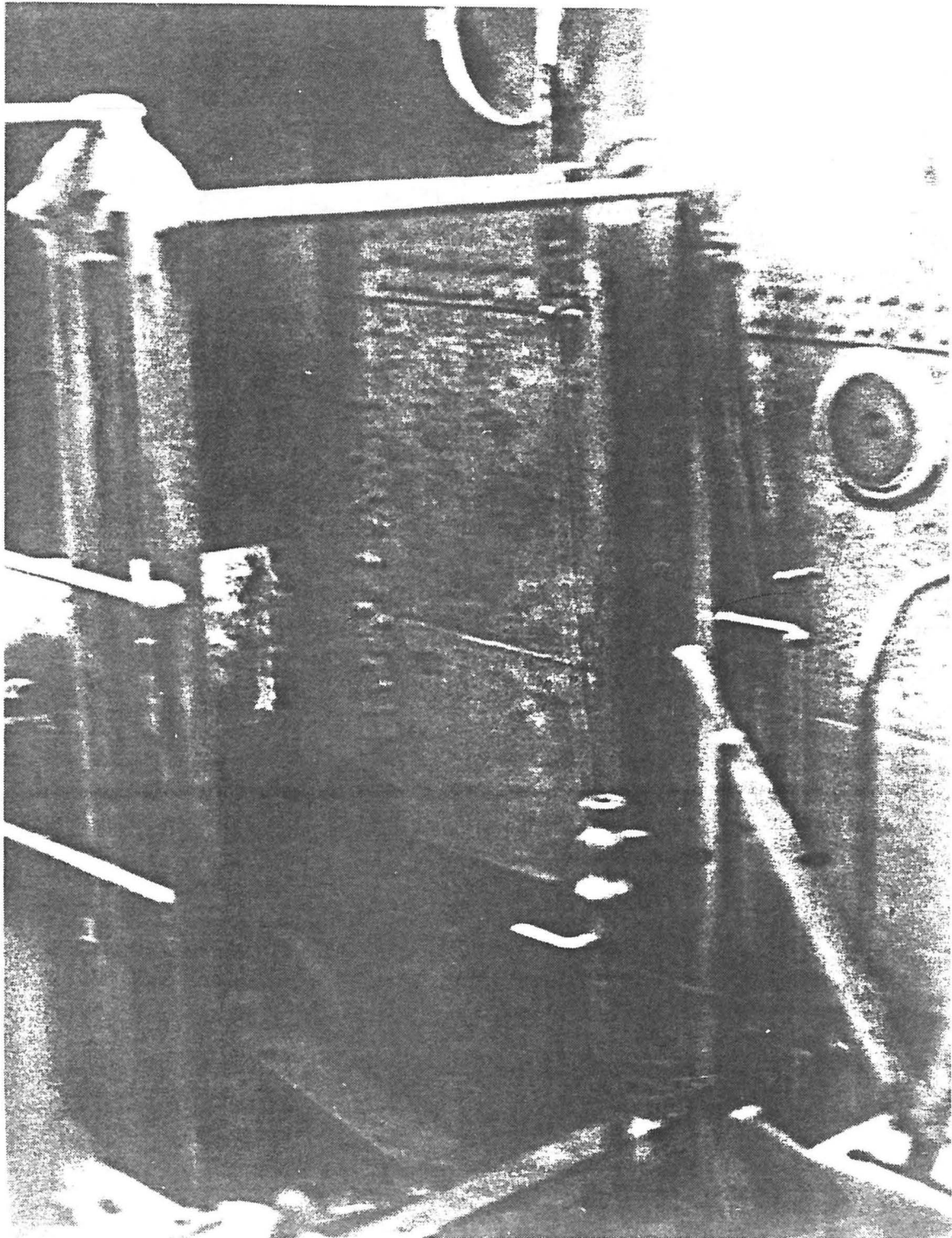
The EPPLETON HALL, unlike the ROKER, had a head-way trippet and a stern-way trippet -- the little foot pedal that you had in addition to the handles to operate the engine. The trippet released the pawl which dropped over the gab lever and then she would work automatically.

Then you would be "in gear". The ROKER, however, didn't have a stern-way trippet -- you had to get your engine going in the direction required and then use the single trippet to drop it into gear.

In this photograph you can see the brass grease cup and its little lever

towards the bottom of the picture. The two levers in the lower right corner released the steam into the slide valves to adjust the speed of the engine.

The working handle for the engine -- for working her ahead or astern (except in the EPPLETON HALL you had a reverse trippet on the platform) is what you put your most effort into. The engineer would have to work both of them at the time the fireman was below attending to his fires. Although sometimes the mate used to relieve on the engine stand.



If you had a burned out tube you had to put in a permanent stopper -- a long rod with a washer and nut at each end. That was a terrible job -- Wallace Beery did it in the movie "Tugboat Annie" and they had it about right (what they didn't have right was making fast the towline to a handrail on the sailing ship and then starting to tow -- there was quite a bit of comment on Wearside about that). To put in the stopper you had to dry your fires and then send somebody to the back end of the boiler through the furnace, wrapped in wet sacks, to put the washer and nut on that end. I've seen them come out exhausted, particularly if it was an emergency situation and there was still heat in the boilers. Wallace Beery wasn't putting it on too thick.

Continuing with the color scheme -- the half round supporting the bottom of the boiler would be done out in red lead or some similar color. The condenser tube boxes would be painted green; the two main steam pipes in the fire hole (they never called it stoke hole; it was always fire hole) were polished copper, and the fire room sides would be done in black varnish.

Going along the bunker sides from where the fires are to the fore part of the engines, they would be painted the top part stone color and the bottom part red deck paint. The wooden platform at the forward end of the engine room that your donkey boiler was on was scrubbed white. (This was where I used to nap on a cold night.)

After changing over from Lambton's to the Blue Anchor Line (France Fenwick) the funnel marks changed from the black of Lambton's (with red bands -- the Lambton Worm) to the white of France Fenwick. This caused the discoloration from use to be more visible -- the white was hard to keep up. We painted the funnel with paraffin and white zinc powder. As on the boiler fronts, the white was supposed to remain after the heat had evaporated away the paraffin.

The flame from the boilers used to strike the inside of the funnel on the forward side. It discolored the blue and white stripes that were the background for the France Fenwick anchor -- the "policeman's cuff" as it was commonly known. So they decided to put an extra band of plating that stood off the funnel on studs about six inches to carry the policeman's cuff.

There was a screw tug called the EARSDON sunk lying at the ways; a ship came down the Tyne and was in collision with her. There was no one on board. They raised her and, to my best recollection, immediately scrapped her. France Fenwick decided to save the EARSDON's funnel and fit it over the

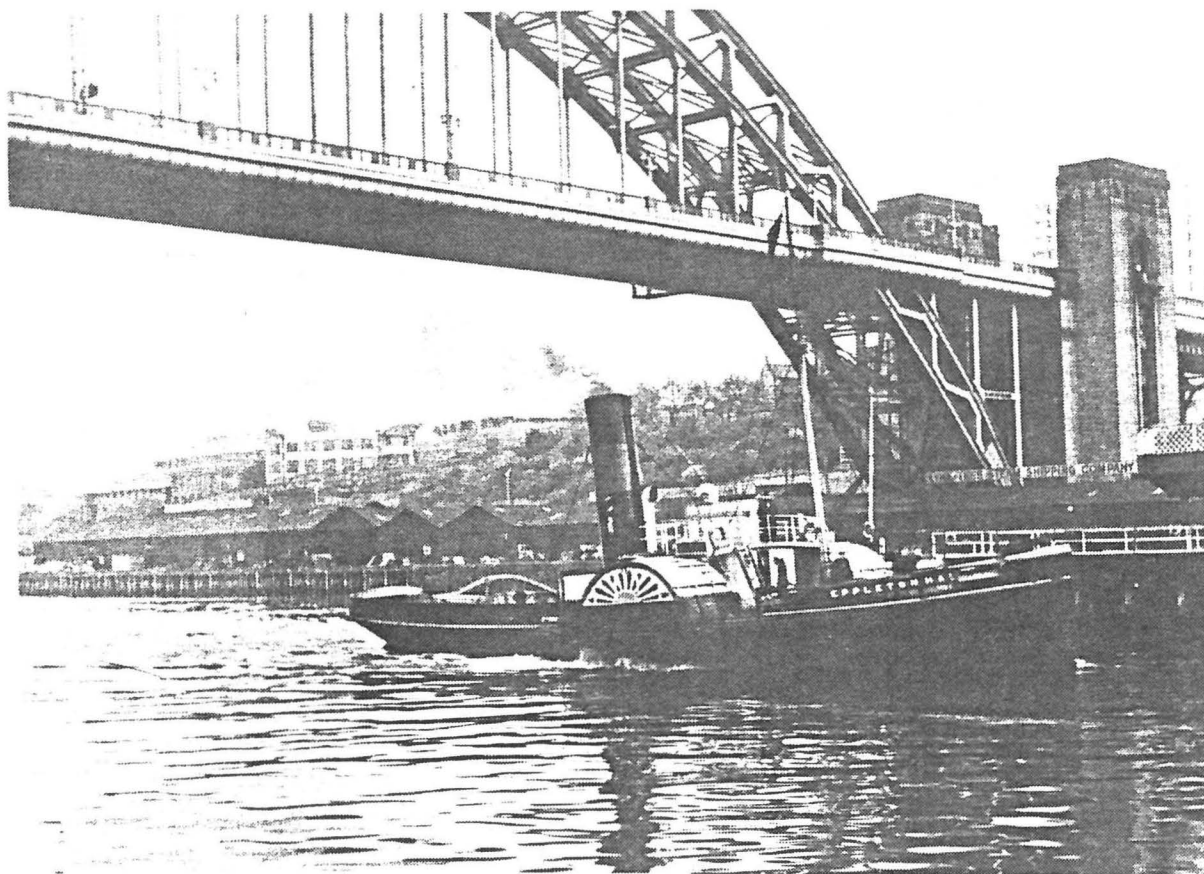
EPPLETON HALL's original funnel, first removing the steel plating they had put on for the "policeman's cuff."

This extra shell cured the problem of unsightliness from the paint burning.

*So I was shipmates with that funnel on two different tugs. Earlier the EPPLETON HALL was in drydock in Shields at Bairds and while she was there I made a voyage on the EARSDON from the Tyne to Rochester and from there to Ipswich. We went to Ipswich to pick up an ex-light vessel by the name of CALSHOT SPIT that used to operate in the Solent. We towed her up to Blyth to be used as a floating headquarters for the Blyth Yacht Association. Hector Stewart was navigating skipper that time and I signed as towing master.**

** One day we had just started a ship away from Lambton drops (staithes) to take the sea; I was the stern tug in the EPPLETON HALL. The collier was the COLCHESTER, as I remember. We had just got her squared up in the middle of the river when our port shaft broke. It made a bang, I tell you. For a few seconds I wondered what had happened, although I had a pretty good idea. Neddy Fields came up: "The shaft's broken!" He would sharp find that out, Neddy. So I cast the ship off and took the tug down to alongside Austin's pontoon, using one wheel and the rudder against her . . . going easy. After the France Fenwick superintendent inspected us the next day, he made arrangements for EPPLETON HALL to be towed to Baird's drydock in the Tyne by the tug GRANGETOWN.*

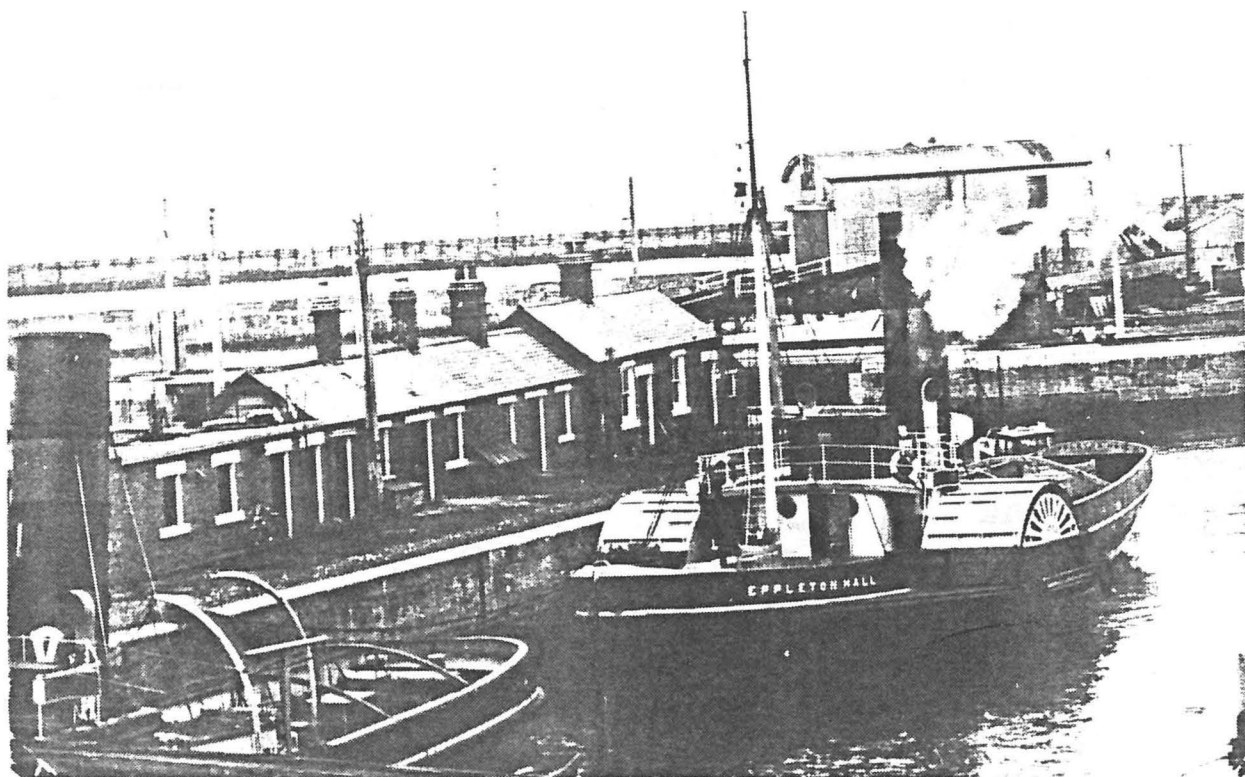
She was there about six weeks for the new shaft; in the meantime I joined the Tyne tug EARSDON. That was the time we towed the barges from Clelland's to Rochester down in the south of England with Hector McDonald Stewart.



"There was only one boss there (Seaham Harbour) and that was the harbormaster, Capt. Nicholson. A portly gentleman; he always wore a blue suit and a bowler hat."

Jack Watson identifies Capt. Nicholson on the bridge of the EPPLETON HALL in this photograph and surmises that the photograph shows her in the Tyne at the time that the Seaham interests took her over from France Fenwick.

France Fenwick sold the EPPLETON HALL to her third owner, the Seaham Harbour Dock Co., in 1964. We used to call Seaham the "Hole-in-the-Wall" because it was an artificial coal loading port, man-made, constructed right in the North Sea. It was about four miles down the coast from the River Wear.



This photograph shows her there, at the tug berth in the South Dock. This was a tidal dock and the gates to it are just out of sight behind the last house in the row. This was the dockmaster's office -- Capt. Nicholson. Next house this way was the Pilot Office, and the next one towards us, the dock gateman's house and store.

Beyond the EPPLETON HALL's funnel, on the other side of the entrance, is the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's boathouse.

They had two tugs at Seaham Harbor, the HARDBACK and the SEAHAM, paddle tugs. On three occasions France Fenwick sent me down with the ROKER

to relieve one or the other so they could go up to Sunderland for repairs. (They went to Crown's slipway, usually.) Once was during the war, and what a job that was! Seaham was black enough to start with, without being blacked out. They had only gas lamps around the docks and even in ordinary times it was hard to make out where you were because the glass would be all smoked over and covered on the outside with coal muck. In war time there were no lights at all.

In Seaham Harbor at the ten o'clock tides, neap, ships would wait at the buoys for the four o'clock tides because there wasn't enough water on the bar. Especially if there was any swell -- then there would be a chance of their bumping the bottom. When the ship got near the bar there the pilot ordered the bow tug to let go (the stern tug had let go already) and the custom was for the tug to keep going and make a big circle offshore and head back in. Not me -- I let go and backed in through the dock gates. What they did was only 'abit. Ritual. The same thing over and over. They used to stand and look when I backed through the gates.

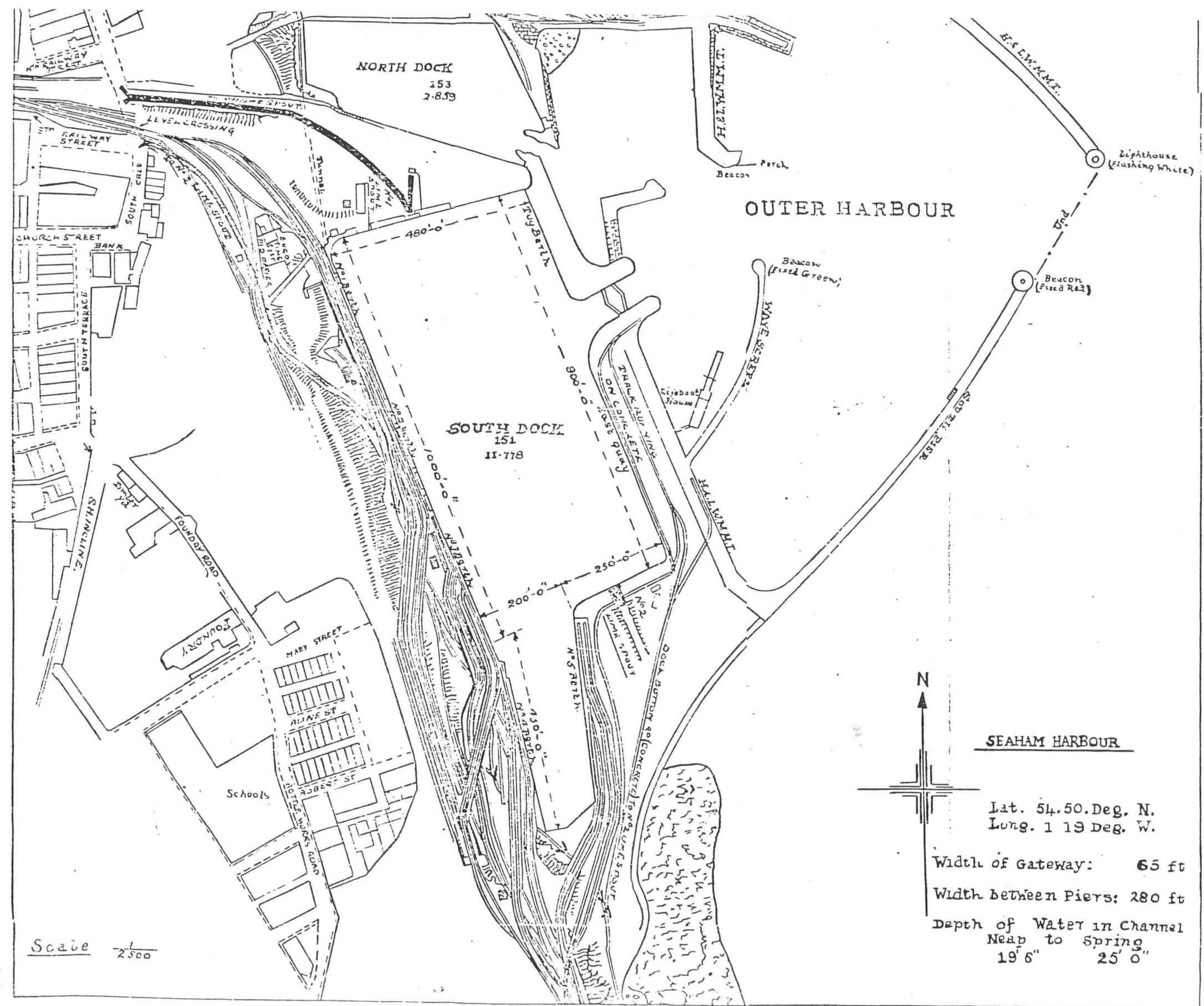
There was only one boss there and that was the harbormaster, Capt. Nicholson. A portly gentleman; he always wore a blue suit and a bowler hat. He treated me very well -- I respected him very much. His office is the one right on the dockhead.

I would be down at Seaham from two to three months. I used to come home every Friday on the bus for the men's wages if the tides suited. They used to close the gates after every tide -- Seaham is a tidal harbor. They would usually open two hours before high water and one hour after, that is if the tides and weather suited and there was no swell. And no deep draft ships in the harbour. I was free of my tug between tides; the ROKER was locked up in the harbour.

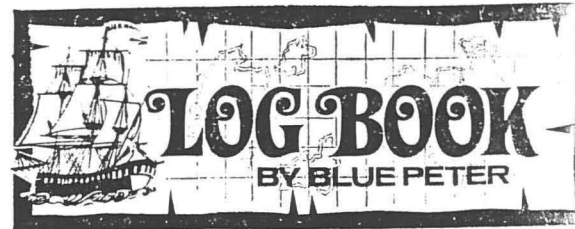
The pilots that worked at Seaham were Dickie Miller, Billy Miller, Jimmy Miller, Bob 'udson, young Bob 'udson, (at some time later harbour-master and also skipper of one of the Canadian "Lake" boats during the war), Billy Tracy (also the lifeboat cox'n), Jack Mackie, and Ira Gear. They were all Trinity House pilots. They had Trinity House pilots at Seaham and on the Tyne; at Sunderland we had independent pilots -- a pilot's association of our own.

I enjoyed my spells down at the "Hole in the Wall" and the people there. They told me one time that if I stayed much longer I would be declared "The Mayor of Seaham".

The last time I was there the repaired tug came back from Sunderland on the Saturday mid-day tide. They were clearing up little bits of the overhaul while she was in the Seaham dock so she could start work on the midnight tide. Capt. Nicholson told me the ROKER was relieved and that I could leave for Sunderland on the same tide. The wind had been in a northerly direction all that



Lambtonian's great wartime record



THE SALE of the Lambtonian and the Lea Grange to Stephenson, Clarke in 1953 marked the ending of a history which had lasted a cen-

tury for the fleet that had always been known as the Lambton colliers. Over the years the title of ownership and management varied. It

began with the Earl of Durham, followed by those well-remembered managers H. T. Morton, Thomas Nicholson, and the Nisbets and ending

with control of the fleet vested in the Tanfield Steamship Company. At the winding up the Etal Manor was the first to go.

An earlier ship of this name had been built by John Crown in 1916 and was lost on September 9 of the following year when she was torpedoed and sunk seven miles off Hook Point, Waterford.

The master and five of her crew were killed. The second Etal Manor was launched in 1942 by the Ailsea Shipbuilding Company under the name Empire Toiler. She became the Van Ostade and then, as a Lambton collier, the Etal Manor.

In October, 1953, she was sold to the Pelton company and became the Moto (No. 2). The first Moto, built by Austin's in 1913, will probably be remembered as a war loss in 1941, when she went down following a collision while on passage from Methil to the Tyne.

LAMBTON SHIPS

The Lea Grange like all the company's new ships, came from Austin's yard and was launched in 1939. Her amazing record is that she carried more coals to London during the war than any other ship on the East coast run.

She completed 142 voyages with 575,000 tons of cargo. Remembered as the largest of the Lambton colliers, she remained on the coastal run,

following her sale in November, 1953, for another six years when she was disposed of for £30,000 to become the Costicos.

No less spectacular was the war record of the Lambtonian, which led the convoys as commodore ship on 111 occasions, and was off the Normandy beaches on D-Day, 1944, as leading ship of the first Merchant Navy convoy.

At that time the Lambtonian was commanded by Captain J. E. Judge and most of her crew were Sunderland men. The chief officer was E.W.E. Cardew; the chief engineer, J. S. Fearon. "Grandfather" of the ship's company was 66-year-old donkeyman James Boxer; youngest on board 17-year-old galley boy, George Hayes.

One of the Lambtonian's minor exploits — though it was vital to those concerned — was the rescue of five Sunderland fishermen from a 90-year-old former lifeboat which had broken down and was drifting in heavy seas off the port in September 1942.

RESCUED

The men picked up were Percy Victor Thew and his sons, Victor and Richard, and Eric Jenkins and Edward Regan.

Another incident in the career of the Lambtonian was the meeting in April, 1949, in dense fog of two skippers who had known each other for many years. Captain D.A. Gibbins, of Silvertown Avenue, was feeling his way along the coast when the Lambtonian skippered by Captain Stan

Judge, of Roker, appeared out of the fog and the ship collided.

Others among the later ships in the Tanfield fleet which have not yet been logged were the Marsden, built in 1924, and purchased from the Burnett Steamship Company and the Hetton, built in the same year and sold to China after the war.

A very much earlier collier Hetton, of Sunderland, was sunk in collision off the Dutch coast in December, 1867, while under the command of Captain Haigh.

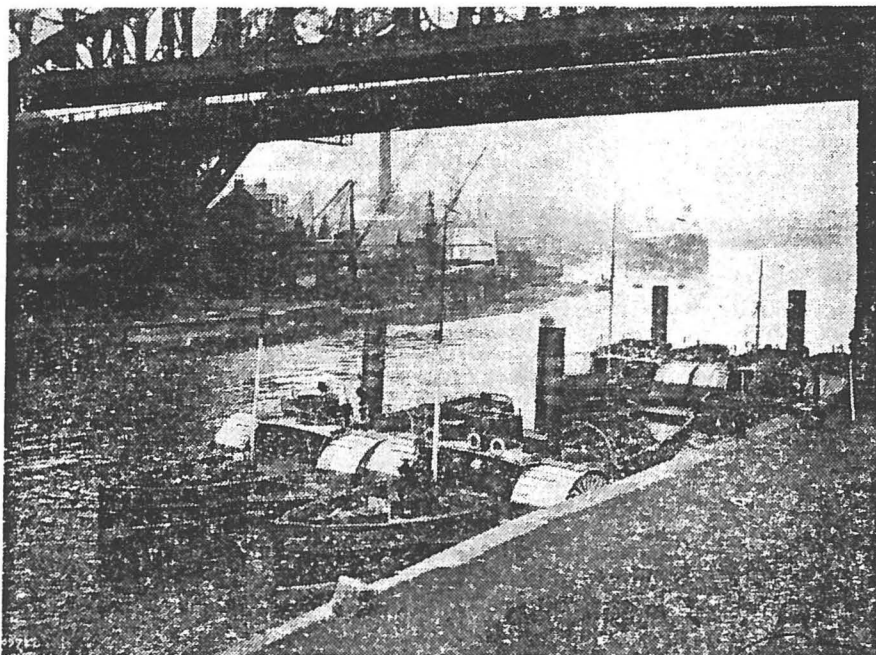
NEW LAMBTON

A second world war casualty was the New Lambton built in 1924, and sistership to the Hetton. At the time of the Spanish Civil War the New Lambton was commanded by Captain Stan Judge who gained a reputation for evading Franco warships.

This ore-carrier cum collier was lost in a south bound convoy when she was torpedoed by German E-boats, happily without loss of life.

In this and recent Log books, we have, with the valued help of readers' letters, taken a long look at what was one of Britain's most important collier fleets.

Between the launch of the Lady Lambton in 1853 and the disposal of the last of the ships in 1953 about 60 vessels were trading as Lambton colliers. In addition there were, of course, those firm favourites and well remembered tugs which are illustrated above



A quartet of famous lugboats, the Houghton, L. umley, Thomas Nicholson, and Eppleton Hall, taken under Wearmouth Bridge in the days when the river presented a very different picture to to day.

day and had "freshened up over the flood," as we call it. This caused the northerly swell to worsen. I phoned the office in Sunderland and informed them that I was finished and they told me to come back to the Wear that night if I possibly could and to go into the South Dock and blow the boilers down so they could start boiler cleaning on the Monday.

That night the weather was so bad that the Seaham harbormaster advised me to stay in port and see how it looked at the next daylight tide. I asked him if he would open the gates for me; I wanted to get home.

"It's up to you, Jack," said Capt. Nicholson. "But once you are out, you don't get back."

In his office he had an instrument somewhat similar to a grandfather's clock that served as a "swell guage". It showed you the swell running on the bar. The bar was between the outer piers. It was showing a big swell this night.

But I said I was determined to go and he had his dock gateman stand by and away we went. The gates were hydraulically operated. They had two sets of gates; the ordinary ones and then a set of sea gates on the outside to protect the inner gates. This night both sets were in use--they closed the inner gates sharp once I'd got past them and the sea gates were opened for only a minute. The ROKER was all prepared to go--the mate had all the lines shifted off the decks lest they get washed away and George Graham had up a good head of steam.

Out I go, shouting good night--shut the gates!

The old North Sea was lively. The swell is always bigger inside to what it is when you got off a little bit. I ran out a couple of miles and up the coast we went. All those paddle tugs were good sea boats; the paddle boxes gave them a certain stability. They rode the seas -- they were not like the screw boats where you had so much power you made your own swell. But it was that kind of a passage where we arrived with some damage to the port gangway and a couple of planks knocked out of the paddle box for all her easy motion. It was the month of January.

France Fenwick's office had informed the harbormaster at Sunderland that we would be arriving and they kept the gates open on the South Dock a little longer than usual. We were safely tied up by three in the morning and off for home. Except the engineer and fireman -- they had to stay and blow the water out of the boilers. They would also ease the nuts on the top boiler doors and the bottom boiler doors so Millburn's boiler scalers from Shields could get in on Monday morning. It was easier to loosen them when the boilers were warm.

On the Monday morning under these circumstances the mate and the boy would be found putting the working boat out and scrubbing around the waterline with a broom while the boilers were empty and she was high out of the water. Then they would paint in a white line and then cut that in with the flesh-color boot topping. Meanwhile the engineman and the fireman would be fitting new boiler door joints

(what you call gaskets) for when the boilers were closed up again.

* * * *

There was a terrible tragedy with the Seaham lifeboat, whose house and launching ways appear in the photograph, about twenty years ago. A coble went off and shot a line (there were many part-time fishermen) and he went off to haul his line and couldn't get back. The Seaham lifeboat went off to fetch him back and as they were towing him in they were swamped close to the Seaham bar. All the lifeboatmen were drowned; I think one of the fishermen was saved; probably he washed up on the beach. I knew the cox'n very well, Jackie Miller, and most of the crew.

I went to the first year's anniversary of this in St. John's church in Seaham. Lord Lambton was there. I met John Todd, the cox'n of the Sunderland lifeboat; he was there with his whole crew and I came back with him.

* * * *

I can count myself one of the lucky ones -- I retired after forty-eight years in tugboats, and had nothing go seriously wrong in a profession that has its share of accidents.

The boss said, "Can you give me any advice for these young fellows in the tugs?"

I could only tell him that you can't buy experience.

"They will have to creep before they walk," I told him, "and walk before they run."

But there is no use thinking he would pass on what I said. Words are of no use here. The tugman hasn't been born, for instance, who wasn't made a fool of in the wheelhouse through the elements.

ADDENDA

Liberty Ships -- daughters of a North Sands tramp

Among the commissioners gathered on the bridge of the paddle tug ROKER (Skipper Jack Watson in the background) for the ancient ceremony of "reclaiming the bounds" of the River Wear (probably equivalent to leasing the state of Rhode Island for an annual nutmeg -- do I have that right?) is Sir N. Thompson of the famous Sunderland shipbuilding firm of J. L. Thompson & Sons, Ltd. Sunderland was for generations the foremost shipbuilding town in the world.

In September of 1940 a British shipbuilding mission headed by Mr. Cyril Thompson left for the United States with the sole motive of ordering ships to be built here. Ships were needed urgently if the Battle of the Atlantic was to be won -- one hundred and fifty ships, totalling one million tons, had already been sent to the bottom by the Germans in the first nine months of World War II.

The plans which the mission took to America were based on what was known in shipping circles as a "typical North Sands tramp" the Thompson-designed and Thompson-built DORINGTON COURT of 1939. Tramp she may have been, but the DORINGTON COURT impressed the British Admiralty with her ability to move some 10,000 tons at 11 knots on a modest 2,500 indicated horse power. The first British "emergency" war-built ship, the EMPIRE LIBERTY, was built to this design.

Admiral Land of the U. S. Maritime Commission was at first not in favor of building what he called "simple, slow" ships, but Todd Shipyards and Henry Kaiser swung into action and, creating new shipyards, built sixty vessels to these plans for the British.

The rapidity with which the war was spreading led to a change in policy by the Maritime Commission. It was realized that slick, sophisticated vessels (like the new C class of American cargo ship) must await better times and that British thoughts of quantity -- rather than quality, "ships built by the mile and chopped off by the yard" -- was the only possible answer under the circumstances.

With a change of heart, Admiral Land (who at one point saved the BALCLUTHA when Harry Lundeberg called him about some "ninety day wonders" who wanted to turn her into a barge) made the final decision -- to copy the "slow" British ships.

"If you want fast ships, fast shipbuilding, fast women, or fast horses, you pay through the nose," concluded Admiral Land. He was speaking about time as well as money.

Thus an emergency type of cargo steamer, based on the North Sands tramp from the Thompson yard and which could be produced on a mass basis by assembly line methods was adopted by the U.S.A.

Admiral Land declared September 27, 1941, to be "Liberty Fleet Day" and the name "Liberty ship" attached itself to the type.

2,741 Liberty ships were built between 1941 and 1944.

Mr. Cyril Thompson's ship was sunk by enemy action on the voyage back to England, but he was a survivor and returned to wartime production at the family shipyard.

K. K.

P82-032

River Wear Commissioners aboard tug ROKER on Barge Day
left to right:

standing: four members of Sunderland Borough Council

seated: Sir James Marr of Sir J. Laings, shipbuilders

Mr. T. G. Greenwell

Sir N. Thompson of J. L. Thompson, shipbuilder

standing: Mr. Marwood, River Wear Commissioners traffic manager

Sir Frank Nicholson, Vaux Brewery

John Watson, master of ROKER

Alderman J. Ritson, Mayor of Sunderland

Mr. Bowan, River Wear Commissioners General Manager

Mr. M. Wake, River Wear Commissioners superintendant

Capt. Chapman, Sunderland harbour master

Mr. Billy Palace, River Wear Commissioners carpenter

P82-078.1

tug ROKER

left to right

Dick Swinhoe, mate

John Watson, master

George Graham, engineman

unk.

P82-078.2

John Watson

Molly Henry Watson

John Watson, Jr.

at Sunderland, ca. 1917-1918

